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Mink raising

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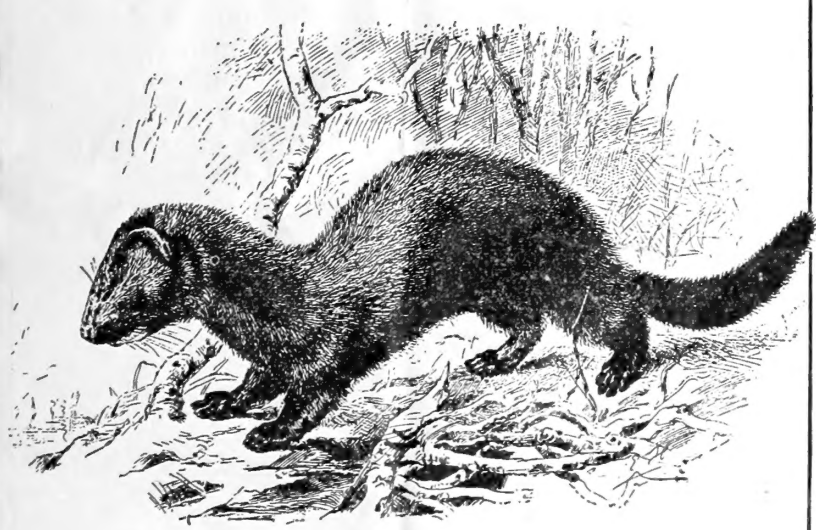
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MINK RAISING



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A KEEN INTEREST has been manifested in mink farming since the beginning of the present century, but it has been spasmodic rather than sustained. Mink farming, however, is not altogether in the experimental stage, for minks have been raised successfully in captivity, and the quality of fur produced on farms is in no way inferior to that trapped in the wild. Minks are very prolific, and when fed and handled properly breed and produce young regularly, their litters usually numbering six, seven, or eight. Those who have made money in mink farming thus far have sold the animals chiefly for breeding purposes. Further experiment will be required before it can be determined whether raising these animals in captivity as fur producers can be made profitable. This leaflet contains information on the following phases of the subject:

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This leaflet is a contribution from the
Bureau of Biological Survey. Paul G. Redington, Chief
Division of Fur Resources, Frank G. Ashbrook, Biologist, in Charge

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MINK RAISING

By FRANK G. ASHBROOK, *Biologist in Charge Division of Fur Resources
Bureau of Biological Survey*

COMPARATIVELY FEW PERSONS are raising minks in captivity, even though the fur has sold for high prices during the past 10 years. Wild breeding stock is not only difficult to obtain, but animals captured wild do not respond readily to good treatment. Beginners should purchase breeding stock from a reliable breeder and carefully follow his instructions until the minkeries are well established. (Fig. 1.) Young minks born in captivity are much

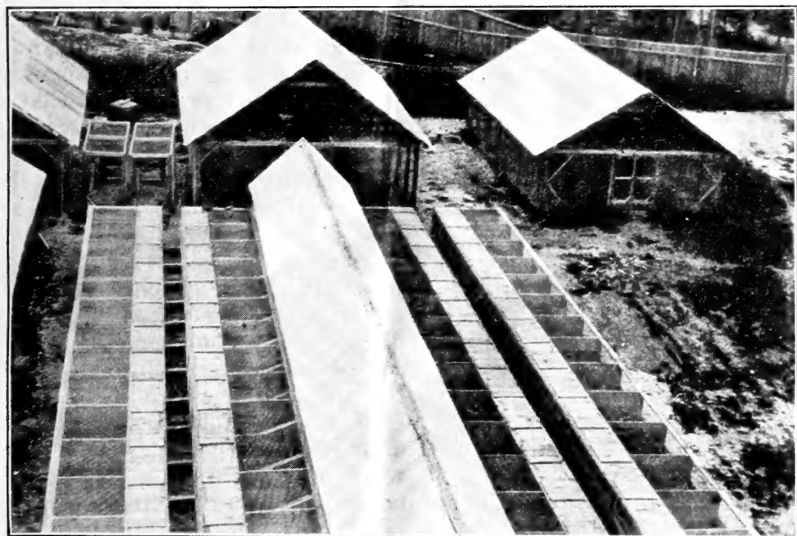


FIG. 1.—A large minkery, consisting of a central house in the foreground with pens arranged on both sides. Other structures are for other animals raised on the fur farm

superior for breeding stock, and consequently the prices asked for ranch-raised minks often are higher than the prospective mink farmer cares to pay.

The American mink is one of the most valuable members of the weasel family and is widely known for its fur. It is long-bodied and attains a weight of from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to more than 2 pounds. The legs are short, and the animal travels with the back arched, in a series of easy bounds, which it appears able to continue

tirelessly.

Minks are bold and courageous and in the wild attack and kill for food species heavier than themselves, such as the varying hare and the muskrat. They eat mice, rats, chipmunks, squirrels, and

birds and birds' eggs of many kinds, including waterfowl and other ground-frequenting species. Along water fronts they capture fish of different species, which they pursue in the water, and vary this diet with one of snakes, frogs, salamanders, insects, crustaceans, and mussels. (Fig. 2.)

Because of its fur value, the mink has been persistently trapped from the coast of Florida to the borders of the Arctic tundras.



FIG. 2.—Mink waiting for its favorite food—fish

With the growing demand for furs, the numbers of this animal in the wild are steadily decreasing, and this stimulates efforts to establish mink ranches. The mink appears to be well adapted to successful breeding in captivity, but the relation of the cost of caring for the animals to the value of their pelts in the raw-fur market is yet to be determined.

When raising minks was first attempted it was believed that a place for the animals to swim

was an essential feature of the ranch. This, however, is not

now considered necessary. Highly successful mink ranches are situated in open fields adjoining suburban properties, on general farms, or in back yards in rural districts. Natural shade is an asset as it provides comfort for both the animals and the attendants who work on the ranch.

On the first mink farms the animals were given an extensive range inside a large fenced inclosure, in which they were fed and provided with nest boxes. Under a later system, families of

Pens and Dens minks were placed in houses with a runway to the water supply. As mink farming progressed experiments were made with a third system of confining these animals, by which each was kept in a separate pen. To-day the individual-pen system is used almost exclusively by those who are raising minks on a large scale. The most satisfactory system consists of pens arranged on either side of a central alley or in connection with a central house. Most beginners start with a few animals, and may adopt on a small scale either the central-alley or the central-house plan of arranging the pens, with provision for increase as the business enlarges.

Pens 12 feet long, 6 feet wide, and 6 feet high will serve well for minks. The pens must be entirely inclosed with 1-inch wire netting, top, sides, and bottom. The dens and nest boxes should be placed inside the pens to lessen the chances of the minks escaping. (Fig. 4.) Blue prints of a mink den, nest box, and pen will be sent on request

addressed to the Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

For the central-house system (fig. 3), a building 7 feet high and 6 feet wide may be made long enough to accommodate the number of pens required. The dens constructed inside the house should be about 3 feet long, 2 feet wide, and $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet high, and should have a hinged cover made partly of wire to furnish ventilation. The opening through which the minks will have to pass to go from the den to the outside pen should be about 3 inches in diameter or 3 inches square. The entrance should be provided with a sliding door to shut the minks in or out of the pen.

The outside pen should be about 5 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 2 feet high. The pens should be about 1 foot apart to prevent the minks from injuring one another through the wires, but should be connected by chutes so that the animals can be separated or changed from one pen to another as desired. The floor of the outside pen

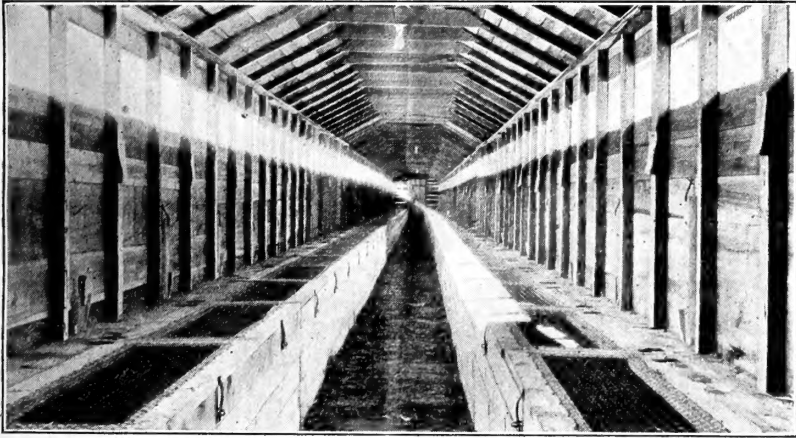


FIG. 3.—Interior view of a minkery, showing nest boxes arranged on both sides of a central aisle. (Photograph by J. M. Davis)

may be made of wood or of a matting of woven wire placed directly on the ground. In either case the floor should be covered with soil 2 or 3 inches deep, and this should be changed frequently. The floor should slope gradually away from the main house to provide drainage. The sides and front of the pen should be made of woven wire, 1-inch mesh, 16 gauge.

The mating season of minks occurs principally during March, and occasionally in the latter part of February. The oestrus, or heat period, occurs once a year. Its length is not definitely known. The female will accept service only during this period, and as a rule not more than one service is necessary. As many as three females can be mated to one male, but it is best for a beginner to handle the animals in pairs. After he has acquired sufficient experience it may be found advisable to adopt polygamous mating. The gestation period is approximately 45 to 50 days, although cases have been known in which the young were carried as long as 60 days. The breeder should make every effort to ascertain

Breeding

the date of breeding, but with minks this is not always possible. The number of young in a litter varies from 2 to 10, but the average raised from adult parents is about 5.

Breeding for prepotency, prolificacy, and disposition are of as much importance as breeding for color and quality of fur. The real

Mating

basis, however, for selecting the minks to be mated is the quality of fur produced by the offspring. The pelt should be perfectly and evenly furred all over the body. It should be dark brown, reasonably long, and lustrous and silky.

It is necessary to study as carefully as possible the nature of the minks to be mated by watching their actions. Animals of approximately the same age should be paired. Males should be placed near or next to the females with which they are to be mated, so that they can see each other through the wire and become acquainted. When the mating season arrives and the pair is placed together, the animals

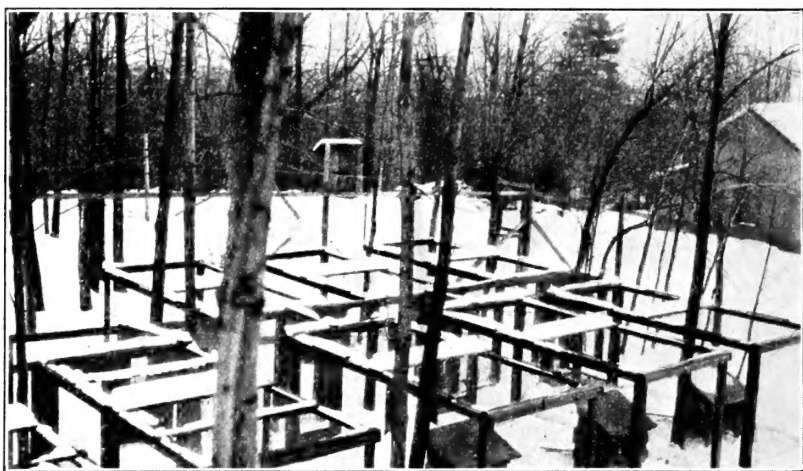


FIG. 4.—Mink pens arranged in rows, one opposite the other. The dens are inside the pens, and the alleyway is inclosed with wire netting to prevent the animals from escaping

should be observed to determine accurately and quickly whether they will live together peaceably. A decision one way or the other, in some instances, may be reached in a few hours, but it may take days or even a week in others. If minks are inclined to get along well together, the breeder may expect a successful outcome. Failure to choose mates properly by careful selection and observation may result in the loss of a valuable breeding animal.

The male mink can be turned through a chute into the female's pen, or he can be caught in the nest box or in a special catching box and carried to her pen. A mating may take place in from 30 minutes to an hour. An aggressive male will pursue his mate and attempt to serve her if she is in heat. He will generally make a clucking noise and she will do likewise. Leave them together for a day or two if they live peaceably. If the female is in heat, she will not strongly resist service; but if a fight ensues, the pair should be separated and not placed together again for about five days.

The food of minks in captivity consists chiefly of meat and fish, and these elements should form 60 to 70 per cent of the ration. Beef,

beef livers and hearts, horse meat, and pig livers and hearts are relished by minks, as also are fresh fish, such as perch, suckers, and minnows. Grinding the

meat and fish will prevent the animals from carrying quantities of food to the nest box and contaminating it. The meat and fish can be mixed together before feeding. For young minks some cooked cereals mixed with milk make an excellent feed.

Each animal will consume 3 to 5 ounces at one meal, depending upon its appetite and condition. It is best to feed a little twice daily and at regular intervals. As a rule young minks will consume more than old ones. Minks in captivity are very active and do not take on fat readily.

After the young are born the female should be given a liberal portion of well-cooked oatmeal and milk for the morning feed and the meat ration in the evening. When the young are about 3 weeks old they will eat what the mother takes to them in the nest. When 4 weeks old they will begin to seek food for themselves.

Minks are usually weaned when 10 weeks of age by removing the mother from their pen. When there is a large litter, and some of the young have developed much faster than their mates, it is advisable to separate the larger animals when 7 or 8 weeks old. The young grow very fast, and as they consume food readily they must be fed liberally. The female generally eats very little a day or two before and after the young are born. After she is separated from the young she should also be given liberal rations so that she can rebuild to normal condition. Exceptionally thin females should be supplied with plenty of milk in addition to the regular diet.

A litter of young minks will live peaceably together and may remain in one pen until fall or early winter. They should not be allowed to run together at all seasons of the year, but instead

Management each animal should be confined in a separate pen. Pens can be placed so that the one containing the male will have one for a female on each side of it. The females placed in these pens should be the ones with which the adjacent male is to mate.

The dens and nest boxes of minks should be kept clean at all times and should be given a thorough overhauling about the middle of

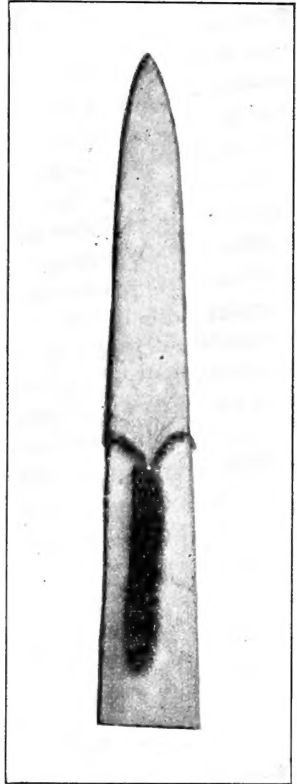


FIG. 5.—Cased mink skin drying on board stretcher

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April, before the young are born, and disinfected with a coal-tar spray. Plenty of clean, dry leaves or straw should be placed in the nest boxes for bedding. The young minks announce their arrival by a crying noise similar to that of young kittens, and this is continued until they are fairly well grown. It is not advisable to disturb the nest box until the young are 2 or 3 weeks old. If, however, there is need of examining the litter before this time, the mother should be penned out before the nest box is opened. She will carry food to the young when they are about 3 weeks old, but this fouls the nest and tends to bring about insanitary conditions. A clean nest box with plenty of bedding should therefore replace the dirty one.

The best method of killing minks for removing the pelt is by asphyxiation. The animals may be driven into a tight box with a

Killing

slide door singly or several at a time. After the door is closed, a small quantity of carbon disulphide or chloroform should be poured on a bunch of cotton and this introduced through a hole in the top, which should then be immediately corked or otherwise tightly closed. Two tablespoons of either liquid is sufficient for one mink in a small box, and not much more is required for several animals unless the box is large. The animals die quickly and without struggle. If illuminating gas is available it may be used instead of a volatile liquid. A rubber hose carrying the gas may be inserted through the hole in the box and the space about the tube plugged with cotton.

Caution.—Both carbon disulphide and illuminating gas are inflammable and should not be allowed to come in contact with fire.

After the animal heat goes out of the body the flesh shrinks from the skin, permitting the pelt to be removed more easily and keeping the skin side free from blood. This will be in about

Pelting

half an hour, but care should be taken in cold weather to prevent the carcass from freezing during this time. The only tool needed in skinning a mink is a pocket knife, and this should be kept sharp.

A slit is made up the back of each hind leg, starting at the inside of the paw and running to the hock, then from the hock to a point just below the root of the tail. The back of each front leg is slit in the same manner from the paw to the first joint. The skin is then worked free from the flesh from the first joint to the claws. The bones of the foot are cut free from the pelt, but the claws are left on the skin. A slit is made from the root of the tail about half its length so that the bone can be pulled out. The carcass is then hung on a hook or nail by the tendon of the hock joint and the pelt is pulled down, the knife being used whenever necessary to free it, until it is removed as far as the neck. Careful work is then necessary to cut around the base of the ears, including them in the pelt, around the eyes, and around the mouth and lips.

The pelt is placed on a wooden frame (fig. 5) for drying as soon as it is taken from the carcass, and all carcasses should be disposed of immediately by burning. Any fat or flesh adhering to a skin should be removed immediately, as fat causes skins to become brittle and worthless and flesh starts decay when conditions are unfavorable for rapid drying.

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